

CONSIDERATIONS ON THE INTELLECTUAL ORIGINS OF ANTI-SEMITISM IN INTERWAR ROMANIA¹

Mihaela Gligor

In the interwar period, the Romanian nationalism was too many times confronted with the anti-Semitism. The “high” Romanian culture has been characterized by a powerful nationalist trend, with powerful xenophobia and anti-Semitic accents, which might not be reflected at the masses level. Nicolae Iorga, Nae Ionescu, Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran – to remember only some of the elites – have all subscribed to different extents to the same nationalist trend, investing some radical political ideas with prestige and resistance in time. The present article intends to analyze some key aspects of the socio-historical, philosophical, cultural and symbolic representations of the “Jewish problem” in the interwar Romania and especially in Eliade’s articles.

Nationalism represents a general European current during the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, offering the theoretical basis for the affirmation of the national state and for peoples’ liberation from foreign occupation.

In Hans Kohn’s opinion, “nationalism, as we understand it, is not older than the second half of the eighteenth century”². This concept

¹ This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research, CNCS – UEFISCDI, project number PN-II-RU-PD-2011-3-0014.

of nationalism implies an integration of the masses into a “common political form”. “Nationalism therefore presupposes the existence, in fact or as an ideal, of a centralized form of government over a large and distinct territory”³. Analyzing the “idea of nationalism” from its beginning and searching its most important manifestations into world history, Hans Kohn identifies some special characteristics of nationalism: “the most usual of them are common descent, language, territory, political entity, customs and traditions, and religions”⁴. In fact, religion was, in most of European countries, “the great dominating force”.

For Romania, during the interwar period, religion – i.e. Orthodoxy – was the main characteristic as we shall see next. It was very strange that the majority of Romanian intellectuals were captivated by this idea, and that starting from Orthodoxy most of them arrived at politics, then the extreme right and finally at the virulent manifestations of this political wing.

As in other European states, nationalism had, in Romania, a negative component, and it exacerbated its own qualities and cultivated a sort of xenophobia which has transformed especially into anti-Semitism. Romanian nationalism wanted to keep and develop its own ethnic existence of the Romanian people. For Romania, the interwar period meant, historically speaking, the birth of the Legion of the Archangel Michael which had as principal purpose the religious and spiritual rebirth of Romanian people. The Legion practiced a bitter form of nationalism for that time. As Leon Volovici said, “the Legionary Movement has, in addition to the features common to the European fascism – anti-Marxism, rejection of democracy and liberalism, necessity of moral and spiritual revolution – the worship of the elite and the new man”⁵. Volovici observed the involvement of the Orthodox Church into the spread of Legionarism: “the Orthodox Church also finds itself into a difficult situation after the union of Romanian provinces... By tradition, the Church

² Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism. A Study in Its Origins and Background*, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1946, p. 3.

³ *Idem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

⁵ Leon Volovici, *Ideologia naționalistă și „problema evreiască” în România anilor '30*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 1995, p. 81.

representatives uphold the State authority and bless any extremist movement which has as its program devotion to Orthodoxy”⁶. The involvement of the Church into politics represents the guarantee that the message of the right wing reaches the poor and surely they will find it appropriate for their wishes and expectations.

The nationalism that dominated the interwar period was, otherwise, “an agent of the activity of nation building”. This “process of building was accompanied by the intensification of a generalized discourse, anti-urban, in vogue, xenophobia and anti-Semitic”⁷.

Anti-Semitism was embraced by some of the most important writers and historians, by the most influent intellectuals. Its point of departure practiced by the members of the generation between the two wars was the rediscovery of Orthodoxy as a truly Romanian symbol. The Jewish problem appeared in Romania, along with crystallization of political and doctrinaire anti-Semitism, during the mid nineteenth century. After the founding of the unitary Romanian state, “the Jewish problem”, which was considered to be “foreigner” until then, was brought into discussion within the Romanian political agenda. Political debates and public manifestations became violent in 1866, when Article 7 of the Constitution (which maintain for the Jewish the “foreigner” statute) was voted and later, between 1877-1879, when Romania was forced to change the above mentioned article in favor of the Jews. Taking arguments from German, Austrian and French magazines, Romanian anti-Semitism was integrated into the European anti-Semite current after 1860 and “the Jewish problem” became the main theme of the political debates.

Until 1907, the year of Mircea Eliade’s birth, the slogan according to which “the Jewish integration in Romanian social structures must be stopped, because it endangers the Romanian national character” had received a large adherence⁸. But, after 1918, and especially, after the 1923 Constitution gave some rights to Jews, a new slogan appeared for anti-Semitism: *numerus clausus*, which stood against Jews’ “crush” into schools and universities. Although,

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 66.

⁷ Irina Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism în România Mare. 1918-1930*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 1998, p. 17.

⁸ Cf. Leon Volovici, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

numerus clausus was only the beginning, a “preliminary phase”, a “form of transition to the ultimate form, the only logic and therefore definitive: *numerus nullus*”⁹.

A few years will pass until Mircea Eliade will write about Jews. Between 1925-1928, young Eliade attended to the courses of the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Bucharest. As the majority of students, he became fascinated by Nae Ionescu, his Logic and Metaphysics Professor. In all these years he would contribute to cultural and political magazines from Bucharest and would study in Italy. During that period he contacted many intellectuals from abroad and became known as “the chief of new generation” (or “the chief of the ’27 generation”)¹⁰. In 1928 Eliade would leave for India with a scholarship, to study the Hindu Philosophy and Sanskrit. When he came back, in 1931, everything was changed. After returning from India, Eliade became permanent collaborator at *Cuvântul* and *Vremea*. His close connection to the Legionary was due to his friendship with Nae Ionescu.

Eliade mentions several times, in his *Autobiography*, about his relationship with Nae Ionescu. In a letter from 1972, to Gershom Scholem, a short time after the *Toladot* magazine scandal due to Mihail Sebastian’s *Journal fragments*, Eliade described the admiration for Nae Ionescu. In fact, he considered Nae Ionescu “mine and my generation’s teacher”. Norman Manea observed that “many years later, in 1967, Mircea Eliade bizarrely included Nae Ionescu in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and wrote this about his mentor: ‘God, for Nae Ionescu, is present in history through the Incarnation... , man’s mode of being is completely fulfilled only through death, death is above all transcendent.’ A Romanian reader will recognize in Eliade’s words more than a strictly academic evaluation”¹¹.

⁹ Cf. A.C. Cuza, *Numerus clausus*, Bucharest, 1923, p. 32.

¹⁰ This is a recently-coined term, never used in Eliade’s lifetime. As Mircea Eliade wrote in “Autobiographical Fragments” published first in *Caiete de dor*, Paris, 7, 1953, p. 1-13, “I had the good fortune to belong to the only generation ‘non-conditioned’” historically, and I took advantage of that good fortune as much as was possible”.

¹¹ Norman Manea, “Romania, the Holocaust, and a Rediscovered Writer”, *The New Republic*, 1998.

Mircea Eliade's Romanianism (and especially its sources) was designed as a matter of spiritual values. Exalted by the right political movement, Romanianism meant, for Eliade, not hating those who were not Romanians, but (especially) recognizing the fact that in this way he could continue (and he could join) the direction opened by Mihai Eminescu. Analyzing this fact, Mac Linscott Ricketts considers that "Eliade's nationalism or 'Romanianism' was not derived from C. Z. Codreanu's doctrines or from Fascism or Nazism. His Romanianism was, first, last, and always, a *matter of spiritual values*: Romania's mission, Romania's destiny, creativity and the freedom to create"¹². Otherwise, Eliade writes about those things in his articles: "many generations tempered their ideology after Eminescu's political articles. All Romanian right movement entities assert Eminescu's ideology"¹³.

Following Eminescu meant trusting the mission, destiny and, especially, creativity of the Romanian people. Eliade considers that "Romanianism is not discussed; it distinguishes itself – at all levels of life. You can not argue your biological destiny. We are Romanians because we are alive. Affirming this evidence does not mean being a nationalist, it means ascertaining the reality, seeing things as they are. Giving up Romanianism means, for us, Romanians, giving up life, escaping into death. Any Romanian who wants to participate conscientiously to spiritual or social life of Romania... must assimilate the Eminescu – Iorga – Pârvan tradition. Otherwise, he would be incomplete. I thought that no one could give up Eminescu but with the risk of spiritual death"¹⁴

In another article, published in 1935, Eliade discusses the problem of nationalism: "Nationalism is not only the great love for the dead and our land, it is, especially, Romania's thirst of eternity. You do not love only what belonged to your ancestors and what still belongs to you – but you want that this whole to be in eternity, to remain over and beyond the history. You love your country and your

¹² Mac Linscott Ricketts, *Mircea Eliade: the Romanian Roots*. 1907-1945, 2 vols., New York, Columbia University Press, 1988, vol. 1, p. 110.

¹³ Mircea Eliade, "Restaurarea demnității românești", *Vremea*, VIII, 403, 1 September 1935.

¹⁴ Mircea Eliade, "Criza românismului?", *Vremea*, VIII, 375, 10 February 1935.

people because you know that, this way, you can remain here, in history, bounded and kept in the land. This love for eternity of people lives in any nationalism, more or less manifest”.¹⁵

As Steven Wasserstrom writes, Eliade espoused a different but perhaps equally vehement version of “spiritual nationalism”. In his autobiography, Eliade evoked the spiritual revolution of the Legion of the Archangel Michael in its own terms, without the slightest criticism: “[For Codreanu] the Legionary movement did not constitute a political phenomenon but was, in its essence, ethical and religious. He repeated time and again that he was not interested in the acquisition of power but in the creation of a ‘new man’.” Eliade in this passage did not provide the historically necessary context of this theme, considers Wasserstrom¹⁶.

The same idea is supported by Sorin Alexandrescu. He considers that Eliade “never manifested interest in political ideas of the legionnaires, but only in the spiritual relevance of their attitude”¹⁷.

As we have tried to show in these pages, the Jewish image in Mircea Eliade’s intellectual development is formed early. Like other colleagues of his generation, Eliade let himself be caught in a publicist whirlpool which brought him a lot of dissatisfactions, both at that time and especially during the last 30 years of his life, after the *Toladot* scandal, in 1972. With all these, his life and especially his works should be evaluated on other bases. Although important and problematic, the political episode and all its consequences did not affect Eliade’s perception as one of the greatest and most successful of Romanian authors and as important personality in the field of history of religion, to whose progress he significantly contributed.

¹⁵ Mircea Eliade, “România în eternitate”, *Vremea*, VIII, 409, 13 October 1935.

¹⁶ Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion. Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 131-132.

¹⁷ Sorin Alexandrescu, *Paradoxul român*, Bucharest, Univers, 1998, p. 234.